

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A1NEW YORK TIMES
3 February 1986

Pentagon Sees Research Peril In Budget Cuts

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 2 — Budget cuts mandated by Congress and the determination of President Reagan to protect his space defense program threaten to seriously disrupt other military research projects, ranging from underground nuclear weapons testing to artificial intelligence, Pentagon officials say.

Agencies researching military projects other than space defense are reeling from budget cuts being carried out under a new deficit-reduction law, said the officials, who are in charge of military research.

Reagan's Priorities Backed

They said they were considering asking Congress to reallocate money appropriated for non-research military spending to restore cuts in the research budget.

The senior Pentagon officials in charge of the research projects said they supported Mr. Reagan's decision that the cuts in the military research budget mandated by Congress should not come out of the space defense program.

But they said that the some military research agencies absorbed cuts twice as severe as other military programs in order that the budget for the space defense program could be spared. Some of the agencies ended up with their research budgets cut by as much as 20 percent this year.

"I don't know how we're going to handle it," said Donald C. Latham, the Assistant Secretary of Defense who oversees agencies specializing in communications and intelligence research. "It's a serious problem. I don't think it's been understood how serious."

'You're Talking About the Future'

Donald A. Hicks, the Assistant Secretary in charge of research and engineering, said he supported the decision to protect the space research program. But when the defense research agencies are cut, he said, "You're talking about the future. You're talking about where Stealth came from and lots of other things."

Stealth, the name given to aerodynamic and electronic techniques that can make aircraft nearly invisible to enemy radar, was developed in part with financing from the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

Both men said they had urged Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger to redirect money from other military accounts to partly repair the damage, but no decision has been made. Such a move would need the approval of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees.

Severe Cuts Are Seen

At the research agencies, officials said the cuts for the current fiscal year were so deep that they would interfere to some extent with all but a few top-priority experiments.

At the Defense Nuclear Agency, for example, Marvin C. Atkins, deputy director for science and technology, said there would be "severe reductions" in such programs as underground nuclear testing, research aimed at protecting aircraft from the electromagnetic effects of nuclear weapons, and attempts to design weapons microcircuits that can operate after a nuclear explosion.

Another official at the Defense Nuclear Agency said the agency has been focusing much of its attention on designing weapons that can operate in a "nuclear environment." As a result of the cuts, he said, some weapons may have to be built without that feature, and then undergo costly modifications later to improve their durability.

At the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, home to the military's most futuristic research, an official said the strategic computer program, for one, would be "dramatically slowed."

That program studies artificial intelligence and high-speed data processing, in hopes of developing fully automated weapons such as computer-driven tanks and robot co-pilots.

Making Computerized Maps

Other agencies that took unusually large cuts included the Defense Communications Agency, which plays a major role in assuring that commanders can keep control of American forces in wartime, and the Defense Mapping Agency, whose projects include development of detailed, computerized maps that can be fed into the electronic memories of cruise missiles to help them find their targets.

The cutbacks will also eat into highly classified research conducted by the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency, Pentagon officials said.

The first blow to these agencies came

in an appropriations bill in December, when Congress ordered \$169 million in unspecified research budget cuts, to be distributed by the Pentagon among the dozen agencies that operate independent of the Army, Navy and Air Force.

Pentagon officials said Mr. Weinberger opted to protect the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization, the Federal agency in charge of research aimed at developing a space defense against enemy missiles. As a result the other agencies absorbed all of the cutbacks.

Effect of Budget Law

Then in mid-January the Pentagon announced plans to apportion budget cuts in the current fiscal year mandated by the new balanced-budget law, named for two sponsors, Senators Phil Gramm, Republican of Texas, and Warren Rudman, Republican of New Hampshire. Under the law, 4.9 percent must be cut from each account, which amounts to a total of \$325 million in cuts from the research activities of the independent Defense Department agencies.

The law permitted the Pentagon to exempt some programs from cuts as long as other programs in the same account absorbed the cutbacks instead. Mr. Reagan chose to protect the \$2.75 billion budget of the space defense office, requiring the other research agencies to absorb budget cuts of 9.5 percent to make up the difference.

The erosion of the Defense Nuclear Agency budget illustrates what happened to many of these agencies.

The agency began 1985 with plans to spend \$384 million in the 1986 fiscal year. In December Congress approved \$373 million. The agency's share of the unallocated cuts in agency research was another \$22 million, and the Gramm-Rudman measure cut another \$33 million. In addition, an agency official said, Congress earmarked \$16 million of the agency's research budget for unplanned projects favored by individual members of Congress.

From \$373 Million to \$301 Million

In the end, the agency received about \$301 million, far below its expectations and a sharp drop from the \$333 million it had to work with the year before.

"At a cut of that magnitude, everything is going to feel the crunch," said an agency official. "Not proportionately, of course. But there's just not enough flexibility to not hit everything."

The official said that it was unlikely that the budget for the fiscal year 1987 that President Reagan is to send Congress Wednesday would repair the damage. In that budget, officials have said, the Pentagon has limited the research agencies in order to accommodate a \$4.3 billion budget for the space research program.

White House officials have said Mr. Reagan is considering undertaking a major campaign to persuade the public that Pentagon spending in the 1987 budget should be spared severe cuts he believes Congress may try to impose.